DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 076 PS 025 755

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TITLE The Transcendent Teacher-Learner Relationship: A Class Investigation.
PUB DATE 1997-02-20
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (Hilton Head, SC, February 20, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; *Classroom Environment; Early Childhood Education; Elementary School Teachers; Interpersonal Relationship; Learning Experience; Learning Processes; Preschool Teachers; *Teacher Education; Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

Transcendent teacher-learner relationships are spontaneously occurring ones in which teacher and learner transcend, or go beyond, their traditional interactive roles; transcendent teacher-learner interaction is mutually reciprocal, liberating, and growth-oriented. This paper discusses data collected from students enrolled in an early childhood Master's degree course on the topic of transcendence in teacher-learner relationships. Data consists of journal writings, class inquiry, and class discussions completed during a Teacher-Learner Relationships course. Characteristics of transcendent relationships are identified, including mutual benefits for both relators and how frequently such relationships have positive impact. The implications of such relationships are discussed, as is their significance for learning scenarios that otherwise may be crippled by teacher-learner alienation, and learner non-engagement and non-ownership of the learning process. By exploring and analyzing the stories of those who have enjoyed transcendent relationships, the paper identifies: the qualities and characteristics indicative of transcendent atmospheres and interactions, how transcendence in teaching-learning relationships has been invited and facilitated, how learning has been broadened and enhanced within the context of transcendence, how transcendent relationships have facilitated the development of learning communities, and how transcendent phenomena affects relators. Contains 15 references. (JPB)

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The Transcendent Teacher-Learner Relationship:

A Class Investigation

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A paper presented at the
Eastern Educational Research Association Annual Meeting
Hilton Head, South Carolina, February 20, 1997

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The Transcendent Teacher-Learner Relationship:

A Class Investigation

This discussion focuses on data and related analysis collected from participants in a course taught by the researcher on the topic of transcendence in teacher-learner relationships. Transcendent teacher-learner relationships are spontaneously occurring ones in which teacher and learner transcend, or go beyond, their traditional interactive roles. During the transcendent encounter a "turning point" occurs for one or both participants, and life goals are altered or changed. Transcendent relationships are characterized by particular qualities that include caring, trust, mutual respect and love. How transcendent relationships are mutually beneficial for both relators, and how frequently the impact of such relationships is profoundly positive, are identified. The relationship between Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan is paradigmatic of transcendent teacher-learner relationships. Discussed as well are the implications of such relationships and their significance for learning scenarios that otherwise may be crippled by teacher-learner alienation and estrangement, learner non-engagement and non-ownership of the learning process. Exploring and analyzing the stories of those who have enjoyed such relationships, the paper identifies: what qualities and characteristics have been indicative of transcendent atmospheres and interactions, how transcendence in teaching-learning relationships has been invited and facilitated, how learning has been broadened and enhanced within the context of transcendence, how transcendent relationships have facilitated the development of learning communities, and how transcendent phenomena affects relators.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The conceptual and theoretical framework for transcendence in teacher-learner relationships derives from an integrated body of education literature. That body of literature includes educational philosophy, educational psychology and learning theory. The transcendent teacher-learner relationship (O'Hara, 1992) may occur when relators move beyond *secure boundaries of*

endeavor. Both teacher and learner must drop off conventions, rubrics and systems (Moustakas, 1966). To move beyond secure boundaries, both must trust and risk in the process of establishing limits, exercising self-discipline and responsibility. The learner's world must be received and understood by the teacher. As roles are transcended, a turning point may occur. Author of Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1989), Paulo Freire, writes of the importance of *reconciliation* in the pedagogical relationship, i.e., reconciling the poles of the teacher-learner contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and learners (p. 59). Together, teacher and learner may encounter a process involving the expanding of awareness, the emergence of new identity, and steps toward new life.

The teacher's traditional governance stance over children must be replaced by a new pedagogy of thoughtfulness and openness (Van Manen, 1991). It must include belief and confidence in the learner as well as the determination of challenging expectations. Such a pedagogy involves the tactful mediation of love and care, hope and trust, and responsibility. The mediation each of these requires is *tact*. Tact is not obtrusive but is subtle, hardly noticeable. It reads the inner life of the learner, intuiting when to intervene, when to remain silent. Tact creates a warm social atmosphere, a sensitive and flexible tone, but it is also firm, direct, decisive and open. Tact employs humor and stands for something.

"The facilitation of significant learning depends upon certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner" (Rogers, 1967, p. 3). Buber (1958, 1965a, 1965b), Greene (1985, 1988), Palmer (1983), Rogers (1967), Maslow (1968), Macdonald(1974), Noddings (1984) and others have called for pedagogical relationships characterized by trust, care, and mutuality between teacher and learner. "One person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks" (Palmer, p. 31). Martin Buber emphasizes the importance of mutuality and intimacy in teacher-learner relationships (Buber, 1965a, p. 98-100). For relationships such as these to occur, the teacher must "view the world

through the [learner's] eyes" (Rogers, p. 8-9), and must "experience from the other side" (Buber, 1965, p. 8-9).

Transcendent teacher-learner interaction is mutually reciprocal, liberating, and growth oriented. Such interaction is authentic or genuine by virtue of the interweaving of the active and passive (receptive) pedagogical roles. Transcendent interaction is facilitated when there is a spontaneous, personal and biographically oriented attraction between two people. Any teacher-learner relational interaction created by virtue of planning, manipulation or deliberate assignment of individuals is inconsistent with the subject of this study. Again, the connection occurs spontaneously, but the transcendent relationship frequently endures for a lifetime.

METHODS / DATA SOURCE

The heuristic methodology applied in this study was developed by Clark Moustakas (1990). Heuristics provides a format for research that begins with researcher self-inquiry and then moves outward to the encounters of others. The heuristic researcher does not presuppose cause-effect relationships.

Data for this study were collected through journal writings, other written accounts, and class inquiry and discussions facilitated by the researcher. Data were organized into three categories:

(a) data generated by co-researchers prior to the course relevant to their personal relationships with teachers and learners;

(b) data generated during the course relevant to participant perceptions of the role of teacher-learner relationships in pedagogy and meaningful learning; and

(c) data collected months after the course relevant to effects of the course on co-researchers' pedagogical practice.

The data presented retains the co-researchers' language, and is organized according to qualities and themes that emerged during class investigation. The population for this study is comprised of students enrolled in the early childhood master's degree program at Towson State University.

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Procedures for collection and analysis of data in category (a)

Several weeks prior to the course, enrolled students received a letter that included the following assignment, to be completed prior to any other assignment or reading for the course:

> *Reflect and write about your relationship with a teacher or learner. Recall a teacher or learner with whom you had a very good relationship or with whom you had a very bad relationship. What characteristics and qualities in both of you contributed to it being a good or bad relationship? How did the relationship effect how you felt about teachers, learners, school and learning? Assignment needs to be two typed, double-spaced pages.*

Over the duration of the course each co-researcher shared their story with the class. Using the definition of transcendent teacher-learner relationships in O'Hara, 1992, written stories were analyzed for transcendence themes. Verbatim transcendence thematic data were grouped according to their relevance to the research questions. Verbatim data were then compiled in the form of composite narratives. In the interest of coherence, pronouns were changed as needed to reflect a single gender.

Procedures for collection and analysis of data in category (b)

During the course participants kept daily reflective journals. The selected journal paragraphs included in the findings segment convey some of the overarching core meanings and themes individual co-researchers recorded during the course.

Procedures for collection and analysis of data in category (c)

The Teacher-Learner Relationships course was taught during the summer of 1996. In December of 1996 and January of 1997, co-researchers were contacted by phone and asked whether or not the class investigation of teacher-learner relationships had affected their teaching, their reflection about teaching or their relationships with learners. Data were recorded and

categorized by theme. Co-researchers reported overarching changes related to classroom practice and their relationships with learners.

FINDINGS

Co-researchers determined that learning is broadened and enhanced when teacher and learner enter a mutual learning quest or joint pilgrimage. The learning process is made more meaningful when teaching-learning roles are reciprocal so that relators are more intimately engaged in the pedagogical process. Classroom community is generated and becomes "infectious" when atmosphere and interaction are characterized by respect, trust, love and humor. In such contexts, teachers and learners are able to risk, to transcend realities and become different.

COMPOSITE NARRATIVES (a)

What qualities and characteristics have been indicative of transcendent atmospheres and interactions?

Learner Perspective

> The classroom was exciting but also a safe learning environment for us. We were treated with genuine care. I felt like I thrived in the atmosphere of encouragement and respect that she created. She greatly respected her students and was very interested in their personal well being, not merely their academic welfare. She had a very vivacious and energetic personality.
>
> Her passion was contagious and her awe genuine. She valued effort more than accomplishment. She also demonstrated a love of teaching and affection for her students. I realized I was as important to her as she was to me. She was gregarious, active, and always seemed sure of herself. Yet, she made a point of trying to involve me in activities.She was always eager and happy to teach and grow in her profession. I began to

> understand that your teacher can be both your friend and instructor. She accepted nothing but success from her students. She was available whenever a student had a problem. Her style of teaching was one of patience, understanding, and sincere encouragement.

The paragraph that follows is particularly significant because it illustrates the integration of several transcendence themes into one particular example. Those themes include reciprocity, mutuality and intimacy.

> While we all adored her, she didn't seek to be put on a pedestal. she wanted to know us. She played basketball at recess with us, her rosary beads and veil flying. She listened to our hearts' concerns about dating and parents and dances we weren't invited to. She asked about and listened to our music. She wasn't trying to be one of us, but trying to know each of us.

Teacher Perspective

> As a teacher, I make an extra effort to know and understand my students wants, needs, and concerns. Caring, encouragement, and perseverance provide the inspiration learners need to continue enhancing the skills that help to develop self-confidence. The most valuable thing that I have learned is exactly what true education is. It is the reciprocity of teaching and learning which makes it come alive as a profession and gives it that intangible quality of having value not only as a career, but as a way of life.

How has transcendence in teaching-learning relationships been invited and facilitated?

Learner Perspective

> From the moment I walked into his classroom, I felt welcome. He had a warm smile and a very pleasant disposition. His sincerity and trust were evident to me. The interaction and atmosphere that he created caused me to respond differently to this class. We worked

together as a team and no student was ever left out. He was available to talk to me whenever we both had free time. I was able to talk to him about anything - my loneliness, my troubled family relationships, and my fears . He listened without judging, offered advice and encouragement, and repeatedly told me I was a valuable person.

The following paragraph is another illustration of the integration of several transcendence themes that include humor and moving beyond secure boundaries of endeavor.

One day, she started to laugh so hard that her face turned red. The class at first shocked to see a teacher laugh so hard, soon caught the fire and began laughing themselves.

Teacher Perspective

I want all of my students to be confident and successful. I express my faith and support in them. I shower them with as much love and attention as I possibly can without making other students jealous. I know with love and consistency, they will one day prevail.

How has learning been broadened and enhanced within the context of transcendence?

Learner Perspective

She set high standards for our behavior and our learning; because she believed in us, we believed in ourselves and our comprehension and achievement reflected that. Because she instilled a passion, I learned, learned well, and remembered. The encouragement and support she gave increased the self-esteem of her students, both emotionally and academically. We were encouraged, for example, to enter a county science fair - not to "win" but to investigate something we wondered about. Every level of research, if it grew out of the student's genuinely wanting to know the answer, was lauded by her. She was my greatest inspiration and my greatest challenge. I realized that my teacher never expected me to please her, but rather to please myself. After I graduated, I returned to my high

school to visit her several times. Instead of meeting at the school, we went out to lunch. I will never forget the lessons I learned from her about teaching. Effective teaching requires sharing knowledge as well as compassion, understanding, and respect for individual students. I see the relationship between the teacher and the learner as the nucleus of education.

How have transcendent relationships facilitated the development of learning communities?

Learner Perspective

She ran her classroom in a way I had never experienced before. She provided an environment where the whole class became a community of learners. Working together as we did was a regular occurrence in her class and that feeling of being important within the group stayed with me all through my life. Family is the word I think of. We were encouraged to express ourselves and our personalities. She allowed us to be open with our emotions, thoughts, and lives. In return, she shared her life with us.

Teacher Perspective

My classroom becomes a family, a network of loved ones and friends. I have tried to make it an open learning experience, a cooperative environment where children are both learner and instructor.

How does transcendent phenomena affect relators?

Learner Perspective

The caring, motivation and teaching drive he had will always be my goals. It was the experience in class that changed me. Reflecting back I realize how it helped me to develop my teaching methodologies and beliefs. As a teacher, I make it my goal to create an atmosphere where each student will feel comfortable and successful. I recognize that it is

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essential to develop an atmosphere that is friendly and positive before meaningful learning can occur. I suddenly understood that my frustration was self-imposed, as was my fear of failure. If it had not been for him and his belief in me academically and personally, I would not have decided to enter the teaching profession. Because of him, I became more open and even to a degree more extroverted. He taught me to trust myself as well as trust others. He helped me to see the beauty in all things, to appreciate everyone and everything around me; he also taught me to appreciate myself. He awakened my sense of humor and encouraged me to use my sense of humor at all times. I embrace teaching and learning with equal passion and to strive for inspiration...as a teacher and a learner. A strong relationship between teacher and students builds a strong foundation for increased learning. However corny it may sound, I want to touch a child's life the way he touched mine.

The following selected paragraphs convey some of the core meanings and themes individual co-researchers recorded during the course (b).

Somehow it seems ironic that this should be my last graduate class; such fundamental stuff - trust, honesty, mutuality, confidence, and intimacy. Why do these characteristics feel too personal for a classroom relationship? Perhaps it is the rigidity of our present educational system or perhaps it is the rigidity of ourselves. As teachers it becomes our responsibility to make the system work for children. Teachers can effectively defuse the traditional power structure. Setting up transcendent environments can change education dramatically from the inside out - the way it should be changed. The change will eventually purge the rigid and disinterested from the system in essence purifying it.

We watched The Miracle Worker, the story of a teacher who transcended the traditional teacher's role - moving both herself and her student to the next relational level. Anne was relentless in her concern for Helen. She moved outside of herself - assuming Helen's position and demanded of her what she was capable of. It was only through the

transcendent relationship with Anne that Helen was able to reach a turning point in her life. Anne demanded a reciprocal relationship with Helen, unlike the relationships Helen had with the rest of her family.

The story captures so many of the concepts we had been exploring together; it is somehow won another academy award today! Somehow Annie managed to combine a healthy amount of bluntness with grace and tact in such a way that the relationships with not only Helen, but the whole family became transcendent in nature. Anne and Helen's expectations of one another went well beyond what either could have imagined.

As advocates for children we must transcend the traditional teacher's role. We must take the risk that leads to understanding and trust. If teachers are the trigger to such transcendence, then risk taking is no longer optional for us. As children's challenges and disabilities climb by an alarming rate, transcendent teacher-learner relationships become more critical to children's survival. Much like Helen, many of today's children have become victims of those around them. They are the victims not of their own blindness, but of the blindness of others.

This class has been a transcendent experience for me. It has moved me closer to where I need to be. Often in my life I have been a passive participant. I have allowed life to happen around me without my involvement and response. This class has redirected my journey to that place I have to go. I am committed to pursue transcendence, to grow with others in a life of grace sustained by faith and trust.

Several months after completing the teacher-learner relationships course, co-researchers reported the following overarching changes related to classroom practice and their relationships with learners (c):

- increased awareness of how comfortable atmospheres, characterized by mutual trust, help learners to become "ready to learn;"

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- increased awareness of the significant impact teachers have on learners;
- increased, in-depth examination of teacher-learner relationships;
- increased awareness of how ostensibly miniscule comments, words or actions affect learner's growth and development;
- increased sensitivity to learner's feelings and needs;
- increased compassion for and patience with learners;
- increased use of teaching methodologies and strategies that are learner-centered;
- reflection about class discussions has helped co-researchers to effectively deal with difficult circumstances; and
- a deepened understanding and awareness of self as a learner as well as a teacher.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The powerful, often profound, positive impact transcendent relationships have on relators has implications for both theory and practice. Teachers and learners in transcendence are enabled to overcome common educational dilemmas such as learner non-engagement, non-ownership of the learning process, and teacher-learner alienation and estrangement. The transcendent learning relationships and interactions studied expanded participant awareness and sense of possibility. Because transcendent atmospheres can be created and transcendent interaction invited, educators wishing to effect meaningful reform may consider the qualities, characteristics and power of the transcendent relationship as they redesign learning scenarios.

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